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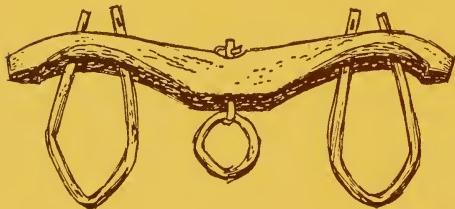
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The drama of Lincoln's
Assassination

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THE DRAMA OF LINCOLN'S ASSASSINATION

By OTTO EISENSCHIML



An Address Delivered at Lincoln Memorial University on the
Occasion of Its Fortieth Anniversary

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Harrogate, Tennessee

The Drama of Lincoln's Assassination

It was the fourteenth of April, 1865. Ford's Theatre, one of the two leading playhouses of Washington, was gaily decorated and illuminated. Although it was Good Friday evening, Taylor's farce-comedy "Our American Cousin" was playing to a full house, for the attendance of the President and his wife, as well as that of General Grant, had been widely advertised in the afternoon papers of the Capitol.

The second scene of the third act was coming to a close. Harry Hawk, playing the part of the American cousin, was alone on the stage. He had just sent some facetious remarks after the retreating figure of an old lady, who had offered him her daughter in marriage. Suddenly a shot rang out and cut into the general laughter that had followed his words. The audience, thinking that the shot was part of the play, paid little enough attention to it; but back-stage and in the orchestra pit startled looks were exchanged. The script did not call for the discharge of a pistol. Before anyone could give expression to his unnamed fear, a slim figure, brandishing a knife, jumped from Lincoln's box and disappeared in the wings.

Through the haze of smoke that filled the presidential box, Mrs. Lincoln could be seen bending over the prostrate body of her husband. Her cries: "Stop that man," shrilled through the silence which had ensued. A stout elderly gentleman leaped on the stage and followed the assassin. He was the only one who had correctly interpreted the tragic event that had been enacted.

Then there was pandemonium. People who tried to enter the box beat vainly against a door that had been barred by a wooden wedge. A physician in the uniform of the Federal army was hoisted into the box on willing shoulders. Awe-stricken men first whispered and then cried aloud the name of the assassin: "John Wilkes Booth!"

The dying President was taken across the street to a theatrical boarding-house owned by a tailor named Petersen. Into the room of a Massachusetts soldier six men walked with their unconscious burden and placed it diagonally across a bed too small to hold the body. Examination showed that a bullet from a small pistol had entered Lincoln's head and lay imbedded behind his right eye. Restoratives were applied, the body was bathed with

brandy, and a small amount of the fiery liquid was forced down the President's throat. But all that medical science could do was of no avail; the wound was absolutely fatal. Shortly after seven o'clock the next morning Lincoln died.

Shocked and benumbed at first by the sudden catastrophe, the whole nation, North and South alike, soon aroused itself to furor and indignation. The plot seemed to have wide ramifications; for almost at the moment of the tragedy at Ford's theatre, a young man of gigantic strength had entered the residence of Secretary of State William Seward and almost massacred the entire household. The Secretary himself had escaped serious injury; but his two sons and a male nurse had been critically hurt. Rumors were rife that attempts had also been made on the lives of Vice President Johnson, Secretary of the Navy Welles, Secretary of War Stanton and General Grant.

Soon the pursuit of the assassin took definite form. Detectives from New York, Philadelphia and other metropolitan centers joined agents of the secret service and provost-marshals of the army in the hunt. Hundreds of men were thrown into the fray; a small fleet was put into service to patrol the coast, while the detectives and the troops swarmed through the environs of Washington. In the meantime, Booth and his companion, a young drug clerk named David E. Herold, lay hidden in a thicket in Southern Maryland, a few miles from the Potomac river. In his jump from the box to the stage the actor had broken a small bone in his left leg; but although he had managed to obtain temporary relief through the administrations of a Dr. Mudd, the misery of his injury had prevented him from reaching Virginia in the early morning hours of April fifteenth, as he had planned.

It was after leaving Dr. Mudd's house that Booth's pride received its first jolt. Southern Maryland was radical in its secessionist sentiments and the young actor had hoped to be received by the population as the savior of his beloved Southland. But when he appeared at the door of Captain Cox, one of the prominent Southern sympathizers of that district, at midnight of April fifteenth, he was anything but welcome. News of the assassination had by that time spread through this section of the country, but it was not received with joy, not even by those who had hated and opposed Lincoln during his lifetime. For one thing, it was generally recognized that the war was over; that nothing could be accomplished by further bloodshed, and that it was foolhardy to arouse the rage of the victors. Moreover, Lincoln and

Seward were the outstanding leaders of the North who were bending their energy towards a speedy and complete reconciliation of the two hostile sections. The inhabitants of Southern Maryland had been willing to sacrifice unstintingly life and property for their cause, while there was still a chance for success; but they naturally refused to be drawn into further difficulties now that Lee had surrendered. Captain Cox helped the fugitives to find a hiding place, but he paid no further attention to them after that. His step-brother, Thomas A. Jones, took care of their physical wants and supplied them with newspapers. Hidden from the eyes of the world and racked by excruciating pain, Booth must have suffered unspeakably when he found that the Southern press, instead of praising his deed, condemned it in unsparing terms. It was during his lonely hours that he made some entries in a little diary, bemoaning his fate in extravagant words:

After being hunted like a dog through swamps, woods, and last night being chased by gunboats till I was forced to return wet, cold, and starving, with every man's hand against me, I am here in despair. And why? For doing what Brutus was honored for — what made Tell a hero. And yet I, for striking down a greater tyrant than they ever knew, am looked upon as a common cut-throat . . . I hoped for no gain, I knew no private wrong. I struck for my country and that alone. A country that groaned beneath its tyranny and prayed for this end, and yet now behold the cold hand they extend to me.

A week elapsed. Although hundreds of troops must have passed near the spot where Booth had found temporary shelter, he remained undiscovered. Then the soldiers and detectives moved away, following some illusive clue; Jones thought the time had come for the assassins to cross into Virginia. Booth's first attempt to cross the Potomac was unsuccessful. Unacquainted with the tidal currents and guided only by a pocket compass, he found himself still on the Maryland side when dawn broke. Another anxious day passed before a second crossing could be undertaken, but on the twenty-second Booth finally found himself on the soil of Virginia. He did not dare give his true name any more at any of the homes where he called for food. Nevertheless, his identity was suspected. Dr. Stewart, a staunch secessionist, even refused to inspect his visitor's leg, and while he would not denounce him to the authorities, he made the fugitives sleep in the cabin of a free negro and had a meal sent them there. It was this negro with whom Herold struck a bargain the next morn-

ing to take the weary travelers to the shores of the Rappahannock. Here fortune smiled on them for the first time. They fell in with three Confederate soldiers who had received their parole and were returning home. To them Booth disclosed his name and threw himself at their mercy. Although he informed them that a price of one hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars was on his head, his appeal to their patriotism was not in vain. Fully aware of the danger they were running, these three troopers from Mosby's corps guided their charges across the river and found an abode for them in the home of Mr. William Garrett, a few miles from the old river town, Port Royal.

In the meantime Colonel Lafayette C. Baker, head of the secret service of the United States, had received news which made him conclude that the fleeing assassins were heading towards Richmond. A squad of twenty-five men under the command of a young lieutenant named Doherty, but really in charge of two detectives on whom Baker could rely, took up Booth's trail. A short time after he had crossed the Rappahannock they followed him on the same ferry. Under threats of death the crew of the ferry-boat admitted having taken the fugitives across the river. They had recognized in one of the Confederate soldiers a Captain Willy Jett whose sweetheart lived in Bowling Green, about fifteen miles away. Toward this little Virginia town the troopers hurried, arriving there at midnight. At the point of a gun Jett was led out and forced to show the cavalrymen the way to the Garrett farm.

It was about three o'clock in the morning when the tobacco shed in which Booth and Herold were sleeping was surrounded by the soldiers. An attempt to negotiate a peaceful surrender was only partly successful. Herold gave himself up, but his companion refused to do so, and after a fruitless parley of some fifteen minutes' duration the shed was set on fire. Suddenly a shot fell. The man in the barn was seen to crumple up, and when detectives reached his side they found him in a dying condition. Medical aid, rapidly summoned from Port Royal, arrived too late; before sunrise the wounded man had expired. The corpse was brought back to Washington and identified as that of Booth by some hand-picked witnesses. The body was then secretly buried.

As soon as Booth's guilt had been established, hundreds of suspects who were known to have associated with the famous stage star were taken into custody. From them eight persons were finally selected to stand trial before a military commission. They were: David E. Herold, who had been captured at Garrett's

farm; Louis Paine, who admitted the assault on Seward; George Atzerodt, who was accused of having been assigned to kill Johnson, and Dr. Samuel A. Mudd, who had aided the fleeing Booth in the setting of his leg. Among the defendants there were also Michael O'Laughlin and Samuel Arnold, two former Confederate soldiers, and a scene shifter at Ford's theatre named Edward Spangler. But the most outstanding figure of them all was a woman, Mrs. Mary E. Surratt, a boarding-house keeper of Washington. It was in her house, so the judge advocate claimed, that the conspiracy had been hatched, and she was said to have participated actively in its prosecution.

The famous trial, known as the conspiracy trial, began on May tenth and slowly dragged its course into the sultry summer days. The Bureau of Military Justice, which handled the case for the government, produced a great deal of testimony, much of which was irrelevant and more of which was of doubtful character. The defense, fighting a losing battle, was balked at every turn by a prejudiced court of army officers, who seemed to consider it their duty to sentence the defendants as speedily as possible. When the verdict was announced no one was surprised that all the accused had been found guilty. Dr. Mudd and three other defendants were given prison sentences; Paine, Herold and Atzerodt were condemned to be hanged, as had been expected; but the news that Mrs. Surratt also was to die on the gallows came as a shock. Hundreds of prominent people tried to see President Johnson to intervene in her favor, but were prevented from entering the White House by the bayonets of sentinels. It is reported that only one woman dauntlessly brushed these soldiers aside to confront the Chief Executive. She was Mrs. Douglas, widow of the late Senator from Illinois. But even her courage yielded no results; Johnson was adamant. On the seventh day of July the four victims paid the extreme penalty.

The unfortunate Washington boarding-house lady was hardly cold in her grave, when voices began to be heard asserting her innocence. Prominent among her champions were Father Walter, a Catholic priest, who had attended her before she was carried to the gallows, and John T. Ford, owner of the theatre bearing his name. Even men like General Ben Butler arose in her defense. "There wasn't enough evidence against her on which to hang a cat," exclaimed this redoubtable advocate on the floor of the House. Finally, two years after Mrs. Surratt's death, the case, in a manner of speaking, was tried all over again. Her son, John

Harrison Surratt, who had escaped to Canada and later across the sea, was captured in Egypt and brought back in chains. In 1866 the Supreme Court had held military commissions illegal for offenses committed by civilians, and Surratt had to answer his charges in a civil court of the District of Columbia. The defense, skillfully managed by eminent attorneys, succeeded in putting on the stand many witnesses who had not been properly cross-examined during the conspiracy trial, and much of the testimony given against the widow was shown to have been false. After hearing evidence for two months, the jury in the John Surratt trial failed to agree, and in due course of time the young man was set free. Most observers felt that the verdict of the son was in reality a vindication of his dead mother.

The four prisoners who escaped the death sentence were taken to the Dry Tortugas, an island off the Florida coast, and there incarcerated in the military barracks of Fort Jefferson. There they were treated in a most cruel manner. In 1867 an epidemic of typhoid fever swept the little colony and O'Laughlin succumbed to the disease. Dr. Mudd distinguished himself on that occasion by his unselfish and devoted services; but after the epidemic had run its course, the lot of the surviving prisoners was not improved. A petition signed by the soldiers and officers of the Fort in favor of Dr. Mudd and addressed to the President, never reached the White House. Nonetheless, President Johnson during the last days of his incumbency in office signed an act of pardon for Dr. Mudd, Arnold and Spangler. All of these men kept protesting their innocence to their dying day, and today many impartial judges are inclined to believe them.

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